

Journal of American Studies of Turkey

40 (2014): 109-118

Henry James Studies: An Interview with Gert Buelens

Abstract

This interview looks at various aspects of Henry James studies past and present, with Gert Buelens, currently a Professor of English at Ghent University and book review editor of the *Henry James Review*.

Keywords

Henry James Review, scholarship, textual studies, journals, e-journals

Q: How did you become interested in Henry James? Did you study him as part of your D.Phil. work at Sussex? Or had you encountered him before?

GB: I actually first encountered James via the Merchant Ivory adaptation of *The Bostonians* that I saw on television, at home with my parents and sister, in 1985, I think. I hated it! I was convinced at the time, not having read the novel or anything by James, that he fully sided with Basil Ransom in this anti-feminist rant. Next, I did indeed have to read James as part of my postgraduate education at the University of Sussex, where I took a course with David Morse in 1985-86. Morse was writing a book on *American Romanticism*, as he called it, and in this demanding course we had to read several of the important (and often big!) books of the American nineteenth century. We started with Cooper's *Deerslayer*, did several novels by Melville, including *Pierre*; some works by Hawthorne; and all three of the major-phase novels by Henry James: *The Ambassadors*, *The Wings of the Dove* and *The Golden Bowl*. I must admit I was not immediately won over. I was twenty-two at the time, and for me, at any rate, starting with those works of James's maturity was not the best possible introduction. With my own students, I tend to start with more accessible works, such as *Daisy Miller* and some other tales, such as "The Pupil," "The Figure in the Carpet," "The Beast in the Jungle," *Washington Square*, too, and *The Portrait of a Lady* as their first full-length novel. Only then would I move on to *The Wings of the Dove*, say, and then in combination with the film adaptations of some of

those works, which always leads to fruitful discussion and reflection on the different assumptions in James and in adaptations like Wyler's *The Heiress* (for *Washington Square*) or Campion's *Portrait* or Softley's *Wings*. The Merchant Ivory versions are less productive didactically, because they are too focused on costume-drama faithfulness to the originals, so that there is little else to raise with students than the cuts that have necessarily had to be made. The stronger choices of the other directors I mention work better in the classroom. But to stay with your question: the main reason I began to work on Henry James in 1992 is that my wife, Sonia, a linguist, was engrossed in *The American*, at the same time that a senior professor at my university, who was on a national funding committee I had unsuccessfully applied to in 1991 for a postdoctoral fellowship with a project on present-day ethnic American writing, advised me, for my second try, to write up a project on a BIG writer that everyone on the committee (made up of literature scholars and linguists working on several classical and modern languages) would know, such as Shakespeare. When I suggested Henry James, he said that would be fine, too. And it was. I got the funding for a three-year fellowship, which was renewed for another three years in 1995. In 1998 I applied successfully, with the same foundation, for a tenured position. So Henry James literally made my career!

Q: *Your book Enacting History in Henry James has been reprinted. Can you say something about its genesis, its basic argument, and whether you think that the conclusions you reached at that time still hold up today?*

GB: This collection of essays arose out of a workshop I organized at the ESSE conference (European Society for the Study of English), in Bordeaux in 1993. I approached several potential speakers directly (including Adrian Poole, Nicola Bradbury and Winfried Fluck) and ended up with a strong line-up that formed a good basis for a book project. After the conference, I contacted other potential contributors with what was admittedly a fairly vague concept for a volume on Henry James: it was more a general state-of-the-art book, with a good mix of well-known Jamesians and lesser-known people (like myself) than a clearly focused argument-driven book. This was pointed out by the reviewer of the book proposal that was appointed by Cambridge University Press. So I revised the concept quite thoroughly, organizing everything around the cultural-materialist notion of the political nature of all literary works—even works like Henry James's that often seem

apolitical, with the exception of some of his novels like, precisely, *The Bostonians* (with its strong conservative voice in the central male character with regard to gender politics) and *The Princess Casamassima*, with its wary analysis of anarchism. For one thing, contributors to the book revisit the politics of those two novels; for another, they take on much less obvious works such as *The Ambassadors*, *The Portrait of a Lady*, *What Maisie Knew*, “The Beast in the Jungle,” “The Aspern Papers,” “The Jolly Corner,” “The Altar of the Dead,” and works from what had fairly recently begun to be labelled the fourth phase—the non-fiction, mainly, of *The American Scene*, the prefaces to the New York Edition. The subtitle of the book—*Narrative, Power, and Ethics*—captured well the three key terms all essays worked with. Yet, as I wrote in my introduction, when the book was completed in 1996, several of them were more aptly subsumable under the general umbrella of poststructuralism and even deconstruction. Hillis Miller’s piece on the performative knowledge that is at the center of “The Aspern Papers” was probably the clearest example. The essay argues that the literary scholar who is the tale’s protagonist can only gain hold of the author’s papers by marrying the niece of the author’s erstwhile mistress, who owns them. Yet, if he marries her, he will become an insider to the family’s secrets and be duty-bound not to publish them. So, the story zooms in on historical facts (the author’s love relationship) that cannot be narrated (as the scholar would wish) but only performatively repeated (by reenacting a love relationship in a marriage). For most of the book’s contributors, the ethics that James’s work evokes is never one where a clear moral choice is available. Rather, James’s protagonists are always in a double-bind between choices that will have questionable moral effects, whichever choice is made. In a deconstructionist vein, the book argues that for James action is nonetheless required, and that a true understanding of ethics involves accepting the responsibility to “enact history,” in the face of the knowledge that one’s actions always have bad consequences for someone somewhere. And, yes, I do believe that conclusion still holds up today.

Q: *Your book on The American Scene has been widely cited as an important text for students interested in the book. Can you say something about why you think the James book is significant, especially for non-American readers interested in the way he represents early twentieth-century America?*

GB: Thank you for the implicit compliment! I think my book, in 2002, came at the right time. Several scholars had begun to take James's late non-fiction seriously as an object of study and my monograph, wholly devoted to James's account of his journey through the Eastern part of the United States in 1904, after an absence of twenty years, spent in Europe, found a ready audience. Two Jamesians had earlier devoted substantial parts of their books to this travelogue: Mark Seltzer in 1984 and Ross Posnock in 1991. Others had tended to agree with either of them: Seltzer was very critical of James's politics in his reflections on the America he encountered, highlighting what he saw as his deep-seated conservatism; Posnock read the same text completely differently, arguing from it for a deeply curious and receptive James, close in spirit to Whitman and to Baudelaire's *flâneur*. My own book attempted to understand how two such good scholars could arrive at diametrically opposed readings of James on early twentieth-century America. The answer I arrived at was not unrelated to what I said about *Enacting History in Henry James*. I mean that both Seltzer and Posnock tried to derive a particular moral, political point of view from James's *American Scene*, whereas, like his fiction, this travel narrative is better understood as a work that reflects a Jamesian double-bind with regard to such choices. More specifically, I argued that Posnock's James is in evidence at an unconscious level—emotionally, he responds to a changing American society with feelings of recognition and with a submissiveness to the power of that overwhelming American scene; yet, rationally speaking, Seltzer is right: when James switches off his submissive tendencies, when he assumes an authoritative voice of judgement, it is a conservative, reactionary voice that at times even flirts with anti-Semitism. To make this a bit more concrete: there's an interesting moment in the book when he demonstrates a sense of kinship with the swarming, seething mass of Jews in New York—where he becomes a part of the crowd and undergoes its massiveness and strangeness ("the polyglot Hebraic crowd") with a sensuous kind of pleasure. Yet, there is another moment also in New York where he takes strong exception to the version of a Shakespeare play that he sees staged at a Yiddish theatre—but not in Yiddish (that would have been alright, I think, for him), no, in what he calls "a language only definable as not in *intention* Yiddish"—i.e. a terrible English, pronounced with a strong Yiddish accent. I find the contrast between such moments in James's book fascinating and regard his reflections on the American spectacle of that moment—often wittily formulated in his inimitable

Jamesian style—of continuing value, since he addresses aspects of what make America so special that are as important now as they were back then: the ethnic dynamics of America, the relation of Americans to history (his birth house had already been razed to the ground to make space for new buildings), the absence of private spaces in America—the greater reliance on a notion of the public and publicity.

Q: *You have been involved with the Henry James Society and the Henry James Review. Can you say something about both the journal and the society - what their aims and objectives might be?*

GB: I was President of the Henry James Society in 2005. The function is always for one year, but you are initially elected to the post of Secretary for a year, then move on to Vice-President for a second year, and are President in the third year. The main objective of the Society, whose day-to-day running is in the capable hands of my friend Greg Zacharias, Executive Director, is to create a network for scholars interested in Henry James, and that mainly happens by means of the big conference that is organized every third year. The most recent, this summer, was in Aberdeen; before that it was held in Rome (2011), Newport, RI (2008) and Venice (2005). You become a member by subscribing to the journal—the *Henry James Review*. The journal was founded in 1979 by Daniel Mark Fogel, who edited it until 1995, when Susan Griffin took over. It has, in my view, consistently published important work on Henry James by a wide range of scholars—some who mainly work on Henry James; others who have made their mark elsewhere in literary studies but maintain a keen interest in James as well. Particularly good for the journal has been the annual award of the Leon Edel Prize for an article by a junior scholar. I have twice served as jury member for the Prize and was impressed by the high level of the submissions—and there were more than thirty. What has also been quite productive is the themed issues, which invite submissions on a particular aspect of James scholarship, for instance the James and Race Forum, which was actually in the first issue Griffin edited. I found that issue tremendously stimulating for my work at the time. I would even say that it is this issue, and contributions to it by scholars like Kenneth Warren, Sara Blair, Ross Posnock, Leland Person, Eric Haralson, Beverly Haviland and Walter Benn Michaels, that laid the basis for how I went

on to engage with the ethnic dimension of James's *American Scene* in my book *Henry James and the "Aliens."* I was extremely pleased when Susan Griffin invited me, in 2010, to become Book Review Editor of the journal. In that capacity, I have tried to increase our coverage of what is published on Henry James, seeking out not just monographs but also books that are devoted in significant part to Henry James alongside other writers. What has helped achieve such fuller coverage is our ability to publish a portion of the book reviews online on the journal's website with Johns Hopkins University Press, limiting the print publication of reviews to the full-fledged review essays that I have encouraged at the same time—essays that discuss several books, or, occasionally, a review of a single book deemed worthy of extensive treatment. That was the case, for instance, with Daniel Mark Fogel's review of Michael Anesko's *Monopolizing the Master*, which critically traces the effect of Leon Edel's privileged relation to the James archives while writing his biography—his hold over the cultural capital that Henry James formed.

Q: *Do you think the Henry James E-Journal is a good means to disseminate new work on Henry James? If so, why?*

GB: The *Henry James E-Journal* has been in existence for fourteen years, and has published fourteen installments. That is not very much, but Richard Hathaway and I have had to reject quite a few submissions over the years because their focus was not clear enough, for instance, or their documentation insufficiently scholarly to stand the test of academic scrutiny. Yet, what is there is good stuff, I'd say, and is freely available to anyone with an internet connection. That, alas, is untrue of the e-version of a journal like the *Henry James Review*, which is only accessible to those with a (library) subscription to it. I do not know how many times the contributions have been consulted, but even if that number were not very large, I would still think the website offers a valuable service to those people who want to extend their knowledge on Henry James's work. Maybe the term E-Journal is a misnomer, given the low frequency with which we publish: perhaps it is more an E-Resource. I think of it as not very different in function to what the mailing list James F-L offers. That free online discussion forum has also been known to go quiet for weeks and even months on end, and then, all of a sudden, someone asks a productive question or voices an interesting opinion and in a matter of a few days you have dozens of responses from

what is obviously quite a large community of subscribers. Some of the best contributions from my perspective have been the specific questions asked by Frank Lekens, a translator of James into Dutch, which also happens to be my native language. Yet he just asks for help with understanding particularly dense passages or obscure references and people who do not know Dutch come up with helpful suggestions too, and the knots Frank encounters are very often ones that many of us struggle to unravel.

Q: *What are your current research concerns to do with Henry James? Can you say something about them?*

GB: I am enjoying a one-year research sabbatical, which enables me to complete work on the scholarly edition of two of James's early novels for the Cambridge University Press *Complete Fiction of Henry James*. I am editing the little-known novel *Confidence* on my own, and co-editing *Washington Square* with Susan Griffin. Both were first published in book form in 1880, just before *The Portrait of a Lady*. My sabbatical is in London as a Visiting Research Fellow at the Institute of English Studies, part of the University of London. I make use of the tremendous facilities of the British Library to document references in James's novels to practices of his day and age. For instance, I pay attention to such things as what travel was like back then. When a character is said to travel from Venice to Baden, what did that involve? When a character charges another character with having taken his time over the transatlantic journey, how should we read this? What was the typical duration of a sailing? My research into the genesis of *Confidence* has brought an interesting fact to light, which I plan to expand on in an article—not just in the introduction to the edition: that James actually revised the ending of the novel from one manuscript version to another. Hitherto, it was believed such revision only took place at later stages of a novel's life—slight revisions between magazine publication and first book publication; bigger changes between first book publication and the revised version prepared for the New York Edition of most of James's work in 1907-1909. Yet, on the basis of letters recently discovered by the editors of the *Complete Letters of Henry James*, Pierre Walker and Greg Zacharias, it is possible to demonstrate that James changed his mind over the ending of this early novel, first writing out his Notebook plan for a character to murder his wife, then scrapping this sordid ending and substituting for it

a somewhat too happy ending in which the husband discovers how deeply he actually loves his wife.

Q: *What futures do you predict for Henry James scholarship (if any)?*

GB: That's a tough one. Well, for starters, I'm absolutely confident that James scholarship can be assured of a long and active future. A rich author like Henry James can constantly be reread in the light of readers' evolving interests. We use James to calibrate our own concerns. He has proved worth reading from such a wide range of angles within literary studies—narratological, of course, with his great sensitivity to such things as narrative point of view; but also deconstructionist (the aporias in James—the illegible figures in his carpets); New Historicist (James and race); queer (the epistemology of the Jamesian closet); etc. So your question about predicting futures for Henry James scholarship is really a question about predicting what will preoccupy us in terms of society, and our place in it and relation to it, in years to come. My sense is that we are experiencing great tensions world-wide between on the one hand the universalist claims of a belief in democracy as the best political system, oriented towards freedom as the ultimate aim, and on the other hand the particularist claims of the virtues of a strongly led nation-state, not rarely defined in terms of a shared religious conviction to which one submits willingly. Henry James cannot be easily assigned to either camp, I think. What he perhaps saw more clearly than many enlightened minds have realized over the past century or so is that democratization—the empowerment of the mass—does not guarantee the creation of freedom. For one thing, one person's freedom easily becomes another's bondage. But, for another, people do not always want to be free. It is not rare at all for them to choose to be governed by an authoritarian leader after a brief experiment with parliamentary democracy. In James, that dynamic between mastery (being in free control of your own fate) and submission (surrendering control to someone or something else) is strongly present. I have, in the past, published on this dynamic in terms of individual interpersonal relations, but your question makes me eager to explore how I might extend this idea to a more explicitly socio-political level. So thank you very much for that.

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